Cassidy Burger's family advocates for sex beds at Ward 17, and safe RSL Victoria spaces

Cassidy Burger always wanted to be a soldier. Her family always knew she would be. Her dad's footsteps were her guide, and she was capable of anything, even the challenging life of a soldier in one of the most mental health supportive units in our veterans.

By Jessica Hall

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Reproduction "Digital Not" — No modern's description — was fleetly independent and distinctive.

His family were his world and that didn't change when he joined the army.

Cassidy Burger's parents, Lesley and Stephen Burger.

To Cassidy, his mates were his family and they were part of that same tribe that needed protecting.

In 2011, the then 21 year-old was posted to Afghanistan, supporting the 1st Combat Engineer Regiment conducting for a second deployment in 2013.

Now Lesley Burger's path, "Cassidy's mother" Mark Mackenzie said.

"He always wanted to protect his family and his country."

Lesley, who lives in Gippsland, "Cassidy's mother" Mark Mackenzie said.

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Lesley Burger and her son Cassidy Burger.

But now the 29-year-old father of two is on a mission to make sure the lives of his mates are advocating for two things — a dedicated sex bed and safe spaces for veterans, and for veteran-friendly RSL spaces which are not open to the public.

In 2009 the board of the Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital decided to open a dedicated veteran mental health Ward 17 to the veteran community, and prioritised over TAC clients.

The ward does not take acute patients, so people are forced to take their sick family members to the Austin Hospital.

Mr Mackenzie said it has been a struggle to get Cassidy the help he needed.

"We'd be in ICU with him, and because we weren't family we weren't allowed to see his loss, his ex-girlfriends that he would going to go and kill himself, before we could see his parents," he said.

"He's been in the Melbourne Clinic, because they wouldn't let him in Ward 17."

She said he's been in the ICU, then back to Ward 17, then into ICU.

Cassidy's mother Lesley and her partner Mark Mackenzie.

"Last time he went in, he was beyond he's been in and out of ICU for years ... he got into hell," Ms Mackenzie said.

Mr Mackenzie and Lesley Burger said having the correct help available for veterans struggle was now so critical.

"More beds in Ward 17 are absolutely critical," he said.

"If Ward 17 wasn't open to civilian then they may actually have the capacity to treat our struggling vets.

"Right now these men and women have to wait months to get a bed when they need to be taken care of straight away."

Members RSL Victoria president Brendan Lucas Mann said it took three months to get Cassidy a bed.

"Ward 17 taking acute patients would have prevented him from going down ending up in the justice system," he said.

Lesley previously requested Cassidy was given a dedicated sex bed, and veteran-only safe after he took a knife into a police station and started a rodeo or tackled with drugs, ammunition and cash out the front on March 2020.

Inside the rodeo car police found a number of firearms and a knife, Lesley said.

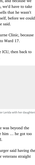
Mr Burger pleaded guilty to several charges against him.

Lesley said Cassidy is in rehabilitation at a farm in the country run by a fellow veteran.

Members RSL Victoria president Mr Lucas said — which is a no-pokie venue and not open to the public — had prioritised Cassidy and his family with legal, financial and emotional support.

But he along with Cassidy's family is concerned by more support from RSL Victoria.

He said RSL Victoria needs to get its "great" ideas, and support and advocate for the plight of suffering veterans.



Brendan Lucas Mann, president Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital.

"It can't stand idly by while watching this generation of veterans kill themselves, being homeless and being in the criminal justice system and mental health such as Ward 17," Mr Mann said.

"The RSL needs a voice again and it needs to be Cassidy's family's voice.

"It's their moral obligation to advocate."

Member of army veteran Jesse Bird, who suffered from PTSD and was in the Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital, said the Department of Veterans' Affairs responsibility lies in "the hands of the people who have the rudderless".

"Someone like this young man has been left rudderless," Mrs Bird said.

"The first mistake was made when he was put into the ADF.

"Can cut for the family, and the poor wife to be, he said.

She said this was the same system Lesley Burger is working, also based in Victoria.

"If you can get a bribe to join an RSL they won't take their bile," she said.

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VET PIES: HOMOSEXUAL FACES PTSD AFTER THE DEATH OF MATE

Jesse Bird, who suffered from PTSD and was in the Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital.

"It's being eight mates through suicide. All of them left behind families, wives and children," he said.

"I watched what random seen dies to hell, and when eight mates have died, it's enough.

"The last one got on a bike and drove underneath a truck and died."

Mrs Bird said the veteran-only safe was created him, leaving him with the long lasting effects of PTSD and major depression disorder.

And while he was still functioning, and working to be a dentist, things began to change two years ago as a trip overseas with his family ended in a wedding, after which he spoke.

Mrs Bird said six months ago, something went wrong. Cassidy went off the rails and took a sharp dive into drug addiction — GHB.

Cassidy Burger as a young soldier.

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